

two detached squadrons. If that could not be done he meant to retreat eastward, take up a position north of the Thames off Harwich, and, secure amongst the shoals, avoid fighting till he was stronger. The strength of the French fleet, he wrote to Lord Nottingham, ' puts me beside the hopes of success, if we should fight, and really may not only endanger the losing of the fleet, but at least the quiet of our country too ; for if we are beaten, they being absolute masters of the sea, will be at great liberty of doing many things they dare not attempt whilst we observe them, and are in a possibility of joining Vice-Admiral Killigrew and our ships to the westward. If I find a possibility, I will get by them to the westward to join those ships/ ' King William was away in Ireland, and the council of regency completely lost its head. Its members could not understand Torrington's reasoning or accept his conclusions. They were afraid that Killigrew's and Shovell's squadrons would be destroyed or that Tourville would land a force in England, and they believed that the French fleet was much weaker than it really was. Instigated by Nottingham, who, having been First Lord of the Admiralty, regarded himself as an expert in naval affairs, they sent Torrington a peremptory order to fight. He remonstrated once more. ⁱ Whilst we observe the

French, they cannot make any attempt either
 upon ships or
 shore, without running a great hazard ; and
 if we are
 beaten, all is exposed to their mercy. 'Tis very
 possible I
 reason wrong, but I do assure you I can, and
 will, obey/ ²
 Accordingly on June 30 he engaged the
 French off
 Beachy Head, was worsted, and retreated with
 his shat-
 tered fleet to the Nore. In the battle and the
 retreat he lost
 six ships. As Tourville had not completely
 disabled

¹ Colomb, pp. 115-6.

² Ibid. p. 120.